

SAŠA BABIČ
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UGANKE NA SLOVENSKEM

[Riddles in Slovenia]

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Folklorist Saša Babič, the author of the monograph to be presented here, works at the Institute of Slovenian Ethnography of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. For years, her research has focused primarily on the study of folkloric forms such as greetings, curses, proverbs, riddles, incantations, prayers, etc., in terms of their use and cultural significance, as well as in the context of folkloric events and communication.

In 2021, Babič published a monograph entitled *Riddles in Slovenia*, which is the result of several years of work with archival material and her fieldwork research. In the book, the author poses research questions about a genre that has never been explored so intensively in Slovenia. At the centre of her research is the riddle, more precisely the folklore riddle (of course, Babič does not bypass the author's riddle in her monograph either), which the author examines in an interdisciplinary way, that is, she takes into account the findings of folklore, ethnology, anthropology, linguistics and literary studies. It is characterised by the fact that the author is not known (any longer), that it is passed on from generation to generation, and that people have internalised it, which is why it is widely known among a certain circle of people. Folklore riddles are a genre that, because of their brevity, are counted among the shortest folklore. They are intended to pass the time and entertain. Riddles are tied to time and place, to life around their users, and so it is not surprising that the themes and content found in riddles are, on the one hand, widespread and common to several peoples, but on the other hand, can be ethnic and local.

Babič has divided the monograph *Riddles in Slovenia* into five chapters. In the first chapter (pp. 12-25), the author focuses on the main features of the

riddle. She points out that researchers can study riddles in different ways depending on what they want to emphasize (e.g., structural features, semantic features) or what they want to focus on (e.g., the description or the answer). In this chapter, Babič focuses on the structure of a riddle, which is usually in two parts (description/question + answer). The author points out that in older definitions the description/question was considered a metaphorical description, but Babič disagrees and shows with relevant examples that this part can also be non-metaphorical. She points out that the riddle does not leave much room for improvisation, since it focuses on the object, thing, or concept stated in the answer. In this chapter, the author uses examples to illustrate the stylistic devices typical of riddles and also deals with rhetorical figures. Babič is also interested in semantic structure and states that description and response do not belong to the same semantics and that there is a semantic gap between them. She points to the interdependence of description and answer and to the fact that in the structure of a riddle the answer would not exist without the description. According to Babič, the essence of a riddle is not the solution, but the essence of the riddle itself is the solving, the guessing. Riddles are a tool of verbal and mental competition. One of the characteristics of riddles is that they can have multiple solutions, so according to Babič, from a broader cultural perspective, there is no wrong answer to a riddle. Any solution can be valid if it is given by a linguistically and culturally competent speaker.

In this chapter, the author also focuses on contexts of use and presents different uses of riddles based on the relevant literature. Following Thomas A. Burns, she summarizes the classification of contexts of use, going into particular detail about riddle events, which are divided into 6 types. Babič concludes that, as in other European countries, due to the emergence of audio and (especially) video media, true riddles aimed at adults have more or less disappeared from everyday life in the Slovenian cultural sphere. Nevertheless, there is still a desire to put people to the test, which is why true riddles have been replaced by a variety of jokes, joking questions and parodic riddles that retain the two-part structure and express the conceptual world in which we live. Babič emphasizes that, in addition, riddles have transformed into other forms of sociability and guided events (e.g., quizzes, radio broadcasts), which, however, represent a completely different kind of questions that test the understanding of topics and knowledge in various fields.

At the end of the first chapter, the author also focuses on making explicit the boundaries between genres of folklore and types of riddles. She uses examples to show that the riddle is a genre that often overlaps or is in contact with another genre. Often riddles are transformed into proverbs and idioms, or a proverb or idiom becomes a riddle. Babič also highlights the fact that riddles have a special relationship with myths, where myths help us understand why things and phenomena exist in the first place, while riddles address their relationships in society by highlighting their properties. The author writes that

riddles are often part of longer narratives, especially in fairy tales, where they test the flexibility of the mind of one of the main characters and are posed in order to gain a certain good or even save a life. Riddles are embedded in and interwoven with the story. Most riddles are posed by an authoritative, powerful figure (such as the king), and the correct answer is often solved by a character who is less respected in society.

In the second chapter (pp. 26-31), Babič deals with the history of riddles documented since the earliest recorded sources, which proves their popularity in society. The author is interested in the oldest collection of riddles found in the sacred texts of the *Rig Veda* in Hinduism, mainly concerning questions about mythology and the gods. It also deals with one of the oldest and still widely known riddles, dating back to ancient Greece and preserving the riddle of the Sphinx. She also points out that the riddle of the Sphinx became so widespread and common in Slovenia that even researchers collecting in this field heard it cited by people as a folklore riddle. Babič also explains two riddles from the *Old Testament*, namely the riddle of Samson to the Philistines at the banquet and the riddle between King Solomon of Jerusalem and the Queen of Sheba.

Babič points out that many folklorists believe that the riddle genre originated in ritual and only later spread beyond the boundaries of ceremonial forms. For all these reasons, it is believed that the earlier riddle forms were more complex and simplified in form and function, eventually becoming a short-lived word (or art) game with its own rules.

Moreover, Babič, of course, cannot overlook the history of riddles in Slovenia, where they were frequently used and accompanied so-called sedentary work (manual labour, cleaning the fields, etc.). The author presents the oldest Slovenian collection of riddles from 1788, compiled by Marko Pohlin, the founder of the Slovenian literary revival, and also writes about riddles at wedding celebrations, recorded in a booklet by Lovro Stepišnik from 1884, a collection of riddles from 1946, edited by Vinko Möderndorfer, and a book of *Slovenian riddles* from 1978, edited by Darinka Petkovšek.

As Babič points out, riddles are tied to time and space, and it is therefore not surprising that the genre of riddles has undergone many changes since its earliest records, especially in terms of the use and application of metaphors, which are inextricably linked to cultural context. As Babič writes, many riddles were understandable and familiar at the time of their creation, but today their meaning is unknown because they describe tasks or objects that are unfamiliar to us. For this reason, Babič believes that riddles can be a valuable testimony of the past and an important source for the study of intangible and material heritage.

In the third chapter, which is divided into two major subchapters, Babič writes about the study of riddles. In the first part, she goes into detail about the

research and definitions of riddles on an international level, starting with the first known definition of a riddle, found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the first internationally known comprehensive work on the characteristics of riddles, namely Robert Petsch's dissertation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, definitions focused mainly on the structure of the description of a riddle. Various classifications of true riddles followed (e.g., R. Lehmann-Nitsche, C. W. von Sydow, A. Aarne, A. Taylor). The author notes that in the second half of the 20th century the number of studies on riddles increased significantly, and so did the efforts to define the riddle both structurally and semantically (e.g., G. Permjakov, J. Levin, A. Žurinskij). Some studies focused on the text (e.g., R. A. Georges, A. Dundes, Ch. T. Scott), others on the context (e.g., D. Ben-Amos, E. Köngäs Marada). The author points out that, in addition to Anglo-American studies, research on the riddles was also conducted in the Slavic world. On the one hand, the studies were ethnologically coloured and focused on the dialogical structure and metaphorical description of a true riddle, on the other hand, cultural studies were also conducted (e.g., V. N. Toporov, J. I. Levin, T. J. Jelizarenkova). The author also mentions recent studies on Slavic riddles, including those dealing with ethnolinguistic meanings (e.g., B. Siki-mić, A. Judin). Babič concludes the subchapter with a report on research in Estonia (A. Krikmann, P. Voolaid) and Finland (A. Kaivola-Bregenhøj) and refers to the important contribution of S. Senderovich (2005).

In the second subchapter, the author focuses on collecting and researching riddles and riddle solving in the Slovenian cultural area, where for a very long time riddles were mainly collected but not researched. She points out the fact that at different times up to 10 different lexemes were used for the word riddle. In Slovenia, interest in riddles began in the Enlightenment period, but they became even more interesting in the 19th century, when two approaches to publishing riddles emerged – either they were collected as part of folklore material and published in magazines, or original riddles (often based on folkloristic models) were created. The author also notes that in the 19th century descriptions of the use of riddles appeared in various ethnological descriptions (e.g. about weddings in Styria). Simultaneously with their publication, shorter definitions of riddles were also published (e.g. by F. Rant, F. Sušnik). An important role in defining riddles is attributed to the Slovenian ethnologist and ethnographer Milko Matičetov, who defined them in 1963. A more thorough treatise of the Slovene riddle, with a theoretical introduction and a historical overview, was written by Andrej Ljubomir Lisac in 1977, but the work was never published. Babič provided the first scientific treatise on Slovenian folklore riddles in 2015 when she created a typology based on the findings of Finnish folklorist A. Kaivola-Bregenhøj.

In the most extensive, fourth chapter (pp. 50-116), the author of the monograph categorises Slovenian folklore riddles based on examples from the material kept in the archives of the Institute of Slovenian Ethnography ZRC

SAZU, which was acquired in different periods and in different ways. Babič divides the riddles into eight types. According to the author, the typology of the material follows the findings of A. Taylor and A. Kaivola-Bregenhoj.

The first type of riddles is represented by the so-called *true riddles*, which are structurally the oldest and historically the earliest forms of riddles and have a number of features, including: they have 5 constituent elements; they must describe an object in a contradictory way; they consist of a positive and a negative descriptive element; they have a well-defined structure and refer to the surrounding world; their essence is based on surprise; in true riddles, the object and phenomenal worlds are located in the descriptions of the surrounding world and the answers from it. The author pays special attention to the descriptions in true riddles. According to the elements highlighted in the description of the riddles, Babič distinguishes seven categories, namely: a) the properties of phenomena, things and living beings in the riddles (e.g. the presence of the category of aliveness, the use of verbs of movement, body parts, etc.); b) animals (mostly those that are part of life on the farm or in the wider environment of the farm, with the exception of the wolf and the bear, other animals and wild animals that do not come close to settlements are rarely part of the description); c) human (the descriptions include body parts, senses, clothing, social status, personal names according to the sacred calendar); d) descriptions with comparisons to several people (these descriptions usually include different family relationships); e) plants (the description may include useful plants or plants grown by man for his own use, or a generic name for a plant or parts of a plant); f) natural phenomena (weather phenomena, parts of day, seasons, onomatopoeic words may be part of the description); g) the material world (household objects, hygiene utensils, interior decoration and tools, various types of dwellings). Within the group of descriptions that the author assigns to the first type, one particular type of riddle stands out, which describes a rider with several limbs and mentions walking as an activity in the answer. Babič writes that this is a riddle connected with the description of the Old Norse god Odin riding the eight-legged Sleipnir. According to the author, it is a common all over the world, although Slovenian variants often mention only the number of legs, heads or fingers, but not the activity itself (e.g. walking). Similarly to the categorization of the descriptions, Babič also proceeds with the answers to true riddles, as these are also closely connected with the immediate human world. She distinguishes 6 categories: a) animals (domestic or wild animals appear in the answer); b) humans and body parts; c) plants and their parts; d) space and time; e) weather and celestial phenomena; f) the object world (e.g. tools, furniture, food and drink, clothing, footwear, musical instruments, means of transport). The author also addresses the issue of answer variations because the description of a true riddle can be interpreted in different ways, but it is true, as Babič points out, that there are no choices in a riddle event, which

shows the power of the person who asks the riddle to determine whether the answer is correct or not.

Babič classifies *sexual riddles* as true riddles because the methods of setting the riddle and the procedures in the riddle are the same as in a true riddle, but they differ in the context of use. These riddles, as the author points out, are set exclusively among adults and often to embarrass them. Foreign researchers point out that sexual riddles are widespread in society and that many of them can also be found in archives. Babič writes about different experiences with such riddles and notes that there are currently only 25 sexual riddles in the Slovenian archive. She attributes this to the self-censorship of the storytellers and the self-censorship of the collectors, who have romanticised the folklore material and excluded all morally reprehensible material. According to Babič, sexual riddles today have moved into the category of joking questions, in which they may indirectly refer to intimate body parts or sexual relations, or they may refer to them directly, often criticising the opposite sex and being offensive.

The second type of riddles are so-called *life-saving riddles*, where it must be clear from the context that the correct answer will save a life. According to the author, the description for this type of riddle usually requires a moral or religious type of answer. This type of riddle is often found in fairy tales where one of the tasks that will save a life is to solve the riddle. According to Babič, these riddles are known from the *Mahabharata*, the *Old Testament of the Bible*, the Old Norse saga of *Hervarar* and the Ancient Greek riddle of the *Sphinx*. Such riddles are rare in Slovenian material.

The third type of riddles are *joking questions*, which are the most productive type of modern folklore riddle. They are expressed mainly as jokes, even grotesque and cynical, and are therefore a menu or transitional genre between riddles and jokes. According to the author, this type of riddle is classified as a humorous genre. Joking questions are clearly different from true riddles. They do not contain poetic figures of speech, are rarely metaphorical and, grammatically speaking, have the structure of a true question, which begins as a question with a question mark (*what is the difference, why, how, etc.*). In principle, joking questions are not solved by the guesser, but the pause in between is filled by a question that makes the guesser say the answer. As Babič notes, joking questions often achieve a humorous effect with a completely absurd answer or an answer that makes fun of a profession, person or situation. Joking questions also do not refer to all occurrences in the environment, but often to current events such as political affairs, wars, natural disasters. They are often chauvinistic and insulting to certain groups, are taken to extremes and are therefore often considered in bad taste. They also often express social stereotypes, which they render in a humorous form. Babič presents examples of some popular topics included in the joking questions (e.g. jokes about

blondes, mothers-in-law, women, men, policemen, different professional profiles, other ethnic groups, etc.).

The fourth type is represented by *parody riddles*, where no form is prescribed, and no norm applies any more. Parody questions use surprising but logical answers. Babič writes that these riddles are a parody of the expected, not a parody of the text content itself. This type of riddle also serves as humour.

The next, fifth type of riddle is the *logical question*, where the description is a representation of a situation, sometimes even a short story, and the guesser must decipher the question that follows the description. The descriptions can be longer and even supplemented by a drawing that provides a spatial representation. They are mainly characterised by arithmetical tasks in which, as the author writes, the relationships between the elements have to be deciphered. Babič writes that logical riddles with clues to family relationships are common in Slovenian material, but also notes that logical questions are rare in the material in the archives of the Institute of Slovenian Ethnography.

The next type of riddles, the so-called *visual riddles/droodles*, show that posing riddles is not only connected with verbal activities, as the description can also be given by a drawing, where the verbal part consists only of a questionnaire *What is this? / What is in the picture?* Babič explains that visual riddles, which were particularly popular in American newspapers and on television in the 1950s and 1960s, consist of three parts. As the author writes, visual riddles did not receive much attention in Slovenian media and remained a folklore genre that survived only among school desks.

The seventh type of riddles are *wisdom questions*, which are the closest to the so-called ordinary questions or knowledge test questions. In the Slovenian material, the wisdom questions are mainly questions related to the *Bible* and religious rites, which the author also calls catechism questions. As she writes, in this case the questions are asked mainly in connection with the leading theme, and the asking of these riddles maintains the fun function, so that the biblical material is illuminated from a different perspective.

The last, eighth type of riddles are *guessing games for children*. As Babič writes, they do not represent riddles in the classical sense, since they belong primarily to games and manifest themselves as a phenomenon on the border between the riddle genre and children's games.

In the last, fifth chapter (pp. 117-141), the author of the monograph presents an example of an ethnolinguistic study in which she analyses the naming of colours in Slovenian folklore riddles. Aware that such analyses are more common for longer genres, she points out that even shorter folklore genres definitely convey stereotypes and concepts, and that these are mainly found in relatively permanent forms such as proverbs, idioms, riddles, etc. According to the author, cultural concepts and stereotypes are often expressed in textual

details such as colours, which express a social perception and draw a conceptual map and are an element of metaphorical expression. Babič writes that an analysis of Slovenian riddles from the archive of the Institute of Ethnography of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts revealed that only 7% of the riddles in the collection contain a colour, and even then, it is the most frequently represented colour in the description. The author notes that the predominant colour in Slovenian riddles is black, followed by white, red, green and yellow. Among the colour combinations, black and white is the most common, which the author believes is often a conceptual contrast as well. She notes that while riddles are considered part of human creativity, colour does not play a major role in it. According to Babič, this was because colours were too obvious as a clue to the answer, so people avoided them. On the other hand, the author notes that 64% of modern joking questions contain a colour, which means that colour is an important element in this type of riddles. She believes that this is due to the number of joking questions about blondes or identity-related references to skin colour.

Although Saša Babič's monograph is entitled *Riddles in Slovenia*, it deals with riddles in a broader context, not only Slovenian, from the oldest riddles to contemporary humorous questions. Taking into account the relevant scientific literature, the author presents in detail one of the shortest folklore genres, the riddle. All theoretical premises are consistently supported with numerous examples from the rich archive of the Institute of Slovenian Ethnography of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and she is no stranger to examples of contemporary joking questions. Despite the scholarly nature of the monograph, the reader remains focused on the text, and the reason for this lies in the understandable language as well as the many amusing riddles that one wants to get to the bottom of. Although after reading the book the reader feels that everything has already been said in this field, the author of the monograph emphasises at the end that the future of riddle research, both in Slovenia and worldwide, will be in the direction of attempts to define the genre as such. She also expects that future research will more often examine the relationship between riddles and other genres of Slovenian folklore.

Saša Vojtechová Poklač

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